Youth Challenge

Story by Beth Reece

Beth Reece

THEY'RE often labeled "losers" — high-school dropouts drifting toward drugs, crime and unemployment. Some are headed for welfare, some for prison.

But put them through 22 weeks of "tough love" at a National Guard Challenge Academy and the experience can change their lives.

"I've done things I never thought I was capable of, like rappel and be part of a team. My family didn't think I'd make it, but Challenge has changed my life," said 16-year-old Amy Allbright three weeks into Florida's Youth Challenge Academy at Camp Blanding, Fla.

Challenge is a quasi-military program that sets high school dropouts on a positive path. Candidates must earn the right to be called "cadet" by adjusting to swift lifestyle changes in a 22-week residential phase that mirrors military basic training. A yearlong mentoring phase follows the residential phase.

"Many of these kids come to us with absolutely no structure in their lives. They've had adults repeatedly fail them, and have never had any kind of success. But we provide them with a structure that helps them to flourish," said Joe Padilla, deputy chief of the Office of Athletics and Youth Development in the National Guard Bureau.

A Solid Structure

The Challenge program is built on eight core components: life-coping skills; academic excellence; job skills; community service; responsible citizenship; health and hygiene;

Elaine Weeks

(Left) **Youth Challenge cadre and teachers lead cadets through changes that emphasize self-discipline, self-esteem and education.**

(Right) **Stephanie Fleming overcomes her fear of heights on the rappel tower at Florida's academy.**

The experience changes lives.

Elaine Weeks (both)

Daniel Johnson *(above)* and Shane Suber, Kenneth Siess and Daryl Brooks *(left)* test their physical strength on the confidence course.

leadership/followership; and physical fitness.

"These are behaviors and attitudes that we can change or improve in a short time with the hope that cadets will lead more productive lives when they leave," Padilla said.

Challenge removes all distractions from cadets' lives — they have no access to television, video games, late nights out, drugs, sex, alcohol or even family members.

"By removing these negative distractions, a child can for the first time focus on himself," said Julia A. Szczes, deputy director of the Florida academy.

"There's a lot going on back home that distracts kids, like crime and drugs. I know a lot of people where I'm from aren't going anywhere. They could use this program," said Matthew Martinez, who graduates from the Florida academy next month.

Not every cadet who enters Challenge responds to academics. So, rather than setting cadets up for failure, administrators allow participants to opt for a vocational track. The hope, Padilla said, is that cadets will acquire the skills to become productive citizens.

"We help cadets figure out what they want to do when they leave, whether it's entering college or learning a trade," Padilla said. "We work with them based on their capabilities, not a cookie-cutter notion of what they 'should' be doing with their lives."

An average of 71 percent of those who do test for a GED actually earn one, he added.

Cadre members and teachers help the cadets change destructive behaviors by sharpening their life-coping skills. Classes focus on healthy role models and relationships, anger management, team building, morals and an awareness of gender stereotyping. A $15-a-week stipend helps them learn money and checkbook management. And since some cadets have children, they explore parenting and responsibility.

Skills that are often taken for granted — like job interviewing and physical fitness — are also built into the curriculum. And each cadet gets a turn at leadership during such activities as drill and ceremony.

Cadre member and retired SFC Randy Walker said he believes most cadets come to the academy lacking willpower. "Discipline is something we give them here that they're not getting at regular high schools," he said.

But Richard Wolf, director of the Florida academy, doesn't place blame. "It doesn't mean public schools don't

work. It means public schools don't work for these particular kids. These kids need something else."

Alexandra Coella needed a push. Now considering a nursing career in the military, Coella had little hope for herself and the future she could provide for her baby daughter before Challenge.

"I was down; nothing could bring me up. But once I got here and the cadre started yelling at me to move, I realized how badly I needed this change in my life," she said. "Now I feel really good about myself and the future." Coella graduates from the Florida academy next month.

Someone to Look Up To

Cadets are high on motivation by the end of the residential phase, Wolf said. But the people and situations that led them astray before Challenge aren't likely to have vanished. To help them avoid old temptations, cadets are matched with trained mentors who provide inspiration and advice for at least one year after graduation.

"Mentors become a meaningful and constant presence in cadets' lives," said Szczes. "We prepare mentors to see a completely different child than the one who first came to us. In the end, cadets have very different outlooks about life, and

Rebecca Lundy, Amy Allbright, Thametria McKay and Alexandra Coella share their progress with families through daily letters.

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The Challenge curriculum is built upon such military values as loyalty, duty, respect and honor.

Challenge is built on eight components: life-coping skills; academics; job skills; community service; citizenship; health and hygiene; leadership; and physical fitness.

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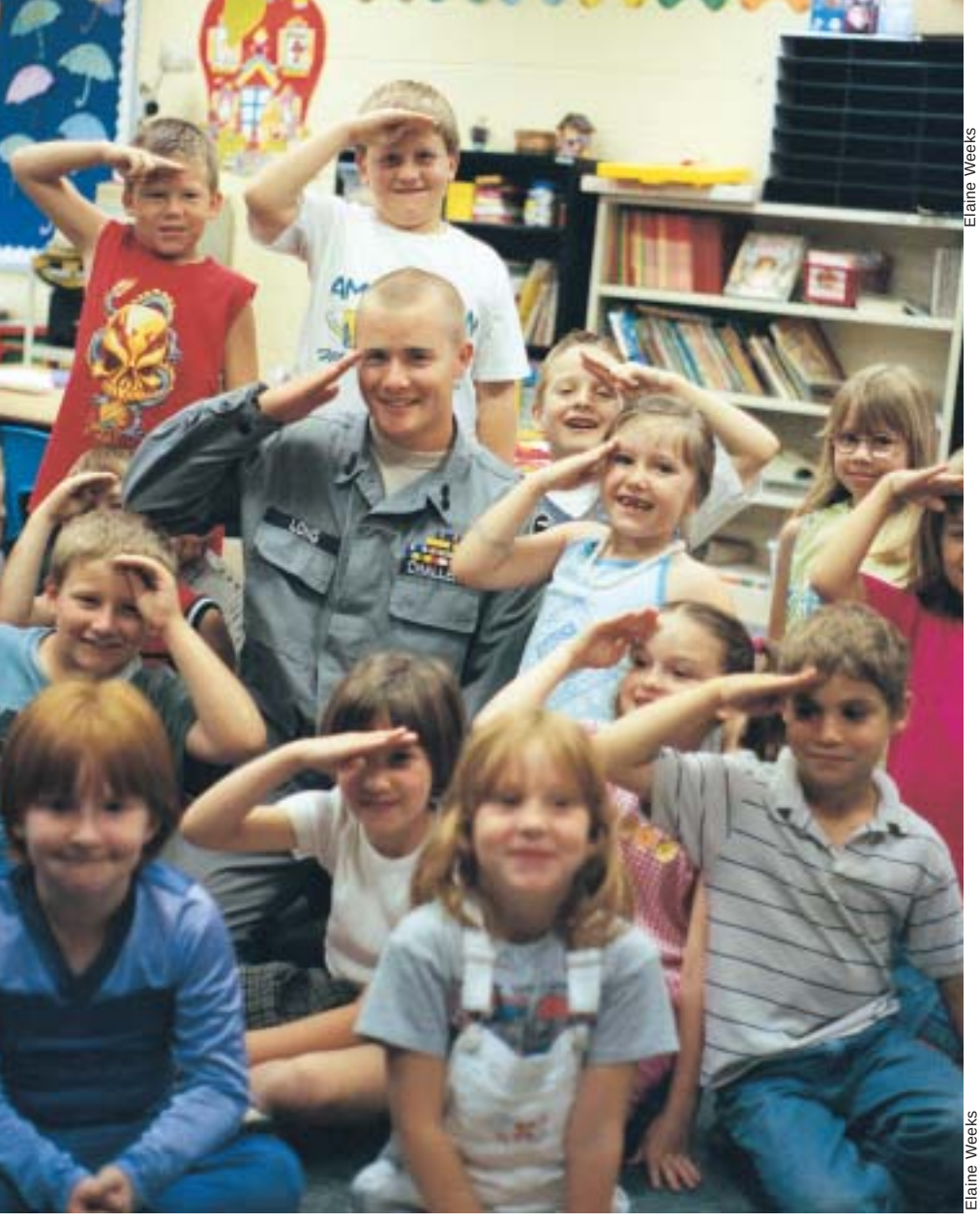

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Dustin Long works with kids at a local elementary school as part of a community-service project during his stay at the Florida academy.

mentors are crucial in helping graduates overcome setbacks."

Mentors talk with cadets at least once a week after graduation. A staple of conversation is the graduate's post-residential action plan — a road map of achievements, dreams and steps the graduate must take to reach the goals he or she set with the help of counselors and cadre.

If graduates lag behind, mentors may ask the program staff to call them back to the academy for a little "refocusing," Padilla said.

The post-residential phase gives graduates what Szczes said they want most: one-on-one time with an adult.

"The mentor is not a parent, a parole officer, a bank or a Mr. Fixit," Szczes said. "A mentor is a coach, friend and listener. So they play a completely different role than any other adult in the child's life. That's huge for these kids — they love it."

The Guard's Role

Challenge doesn't lack potential participants. More than half a million 16- to 18-year-olds drop out of high school each year, according to COL Matthew Urbanek, chief of the Office of Athletics and Youth Development.

"This is as much a homeland security problem as anything else we face," he said. "Part of the nation's strength is in its young people."

More than 19,000 children applied for Challenge last year, but academies nationwide yielded only 7,000 slots. Because funding for Challenge is congressionally mandated, parents pay none of the $14,000 it takes to get each cadet through the program.

Graduates have gone on to become mechanics, computer technicians, welders, dentists, and employees in dozens of other businesses and industries.

Urbanek views the Guard's success with Challenge from both financial and hometown perspectives. "Research shows that every youth who gets in trouble will cost the country $1.7 million," he said. "But I wonder what we get out of turning these lives around and putting good citizens out on the streets. How much is that worth to us? How many lives do we save from a homicide or a robbery? How many lives do we affect by putting a good tax-paying citizen out there?"

Although about 25 percent of graduates enlist in the military, cadets are introduced to an array of professions and higher education opportunities. Graduates have gone on to become mechanics, computer technicians, welders, dentists, and employees in dozens of other businesses and industries.

"I guess you could say we're in the nation-building business. The nation needs more than soldiers; it needs people who support soldiers," Urbanek said.

When someone calls Challenge a "last chance for at-risk youth," Wolf and Szczes shake their heads 'no.'

"I hope we're not anybody's last chance, but rather, their best chance," Wolf said. "We like to think we're the best opportunity these kids will ever have." □